



## Department of Anthropology

### ANTHRO 4426G/9104B-001: Mortuary Archaeology

#### COURSE OUTLINE

Winter 2026

#### **Instructor and Course Information:**

Instructor: Dr. Andrew Nelson

Method of delivery: In person

Credit value: 0.5

Antirequisites: none

Prerequisites: Registration in fourth year in Anthropology and permission of the instructor via application.

#### **Course Description:**

"...Tis impossible to be sure of anything but *Death* and *Taxes*" (Christopher Bullock, 1716, *The Cobbler of Preston*). There are myriad ways in which societies have dealt with this stark reality, and the rituals they construct shed important light on the society at large.

In mainstream North America, we have a very uniform, hygienic and medicalized view of death and burial, while the range beliefs and practices of other contemporary and ancient cultures is quite remarkable.

This course takes a cross-cultural and deep temporal perspective on how different societies have dealt with the loss of one of their members. Mortuary archaeology draws on many different threads in Anthropology, including ethnography, cultural theory, bioarchaeology, archaeological theory, forensic analysis to name only a few. It also reaches beyond the bounds of Anthropology to draw on research in Sociology, Biology and other disciplines to take a truly interdisciplinary approach to how societies deal with death.

This is a lecture/seminar course open to senior undergraduate students. Weekly meetings will start with a short lecture, outlining the major points for discussion, and then the seminar will include student presentations and class discussions. Class participation is mandatory. The critical evaluation of the literature will be emphasized.

A full course schedule including a week-by-week breakdown of topics and assigned readings will be posted on the OWL Brightspace course site at the beginning of the term.

#### **Learning Outcomes:**

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

- describe how societal structures and beliefs shape ritual behavior (observed through ethnographies), particularly in the mortuary context
- recognize how archaeology has contributed to our understanding of variability in societies' responses to death
- integrate perspectives from several disciplines in the analysis of an archaeological mortuary context
- reflect on how modern beliefs and norms shape how we act and react in the face of the death of a loved one
- work with your peers in a collaborative framework

### **Course Materials:**

No textbook

Required readings will be available through the Course Readings tool on the course Brightspace site. Students will provide additional readings as part of the weekly discussion.

### **Evaluation:**

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Grades will be based on the following: (assignment details will be presented on Brightspace)

- Weekly reflection papers/class participation – 20%
- Assignment #1 – ethnographic example of a mortuary ritual – 20 % - PowerPoint presentation
  - due January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2026
- Assignment #2 – research paper on the analysis of an archaeological mortuary context – ca. 2500 words (undergraduate students) or 3500 words (graduate students) – 20%
  - due March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2026
- Assignment #3 – group project on mortuary ritual in SW Ontario – 40 %
  - due April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2026
- there is no final exam
- graduate students write a longer research paper than the undergraduate students and are responsible for the assembly of the group project

The final assignment will be a group project. The overall topic will be mortuary rituals in SW Ontario, through time and across cultures. [Here are the final reports from 2 previous versions of the courses](#). Each student will have a unique topic that is related to the overall topic and the graduate students will be in charge of assembling the final product. This will be due April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2026 (the date is dictated by the requirement to submit undergraduate grades for courses with no final exam within a week of the end of classes)

Please consult Western's policy on [Academic Consideration](#).

## **Late Assignments and Flexibility**

I will consider reasonable requests for extensions on assignment due dates, as long as you reach out to me in person or by email before the deadline.

## **Course Specific Conditions Required to Pass This Course**

Sample text: The Writing Assignments in this course are designed to help you meet the course learning outcomes. They give you an opportunity to go back over the readings, deepen your understanding of them both in relation to the readings for other weeks and to the contextual information shared in the weekly lessons, gather evidence to support your analysis, and communicate that analysis. In order to pass this course, students must complete and pass all writing assignments.

## **Accessibility**

Every attempt will be made to make course material accessible. If you have any specific requests or requirements, please let the instructor know.

## **Additional Statements**

### **Grades**

Grades will not be adjusted on the basis of need. Claims by students of an excellent academic history, good attendance record, need to obtain or maintain a scholarship, desire to be admitted to a competitive program or graduate school, or other personal issues, cannot be used to justify a higher grade in the course or a reweighting of course components. There is no extra work or assignments available for extra credit or to “make up” for a course component that was missed or performed poorly. It is important to monitor your performance in the course. Remember: You are responsible for your grades in this course.

### **Institutional Statements and Policies**

All students should familiarize themselves with Western's current [Academic Rights and Responsibilities](#) policies in the Academic Calendar. Such items include accommodations for students with disabilities, religious holidays, academic considerations, academic appeals, plagiarism and scholastic offences, and code of student conduct.

### **Statement on Use of Electronic Devices**

You may use laptops, tablets, or other electric devices to take notes in class. You may not record class lectures or discussions.

### **Statement on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

Any submitted assignments should be your own original work. Plagiarism or the use of generative-AI tools to produce student work is an academic offence. You may use generative-AI tools to brainstorm ideas (although it would be better to talk to fellow students in the course or to come see me in office hours!), but you cannot use such tools to produce your assignments.

## Statement on Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, in the [Scholastic Offenses policy](#).

All required written work may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between Western University and [Turnitin.com](#).

Computer-marked multiple-choice texts and/or exams may be subject to submission for similarity review by software that will check for unusual coincidences in answer patterns that may indicate cheating.

## Statement on Plagiarism

Students must write their assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing. It is also a scholastic offence to submit the same work for credit in more than one course. Plagiarism is a major scholastic offence. All students are expected to uphold academic integrity by appropriately attributing all sources of information and avoiding plagiarism. Writing assignments should reflect the student's own thoughts and independent written work.

## Support Services

For student support services please see the [Office of the Registrar](#) and [Academic Support and Engagement](#).

## Statement on Gender-Based and Sexual Violence

Western is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence (GBSV) and providing compassionate support to anyone who is going through or has gone through these traumatic events. If you are experiencing or have experienced GBSV (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts on the [GBSV survivor support webpage](#).

To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact [support@uwo.ca](mailto:support@uwo.ca).

**Accessible Education:** Students with disabilities work with the Accessible Education office which provides recommendations for accommodation based on medical documentation or psychological and cognitive testing. Please see [Accessible Education](#) for information.

**Accommodation for Religious Holidays:** Students should review the policy for [Accommodation for Religious Holidays](#). Where a student will be unable to write examinations and term tests due to a conflicting religious holiday, they should inform their instructors as soon as possible but not later than two weeks prior to writing the examination/term test. In the case of conflict with a midterm test, students should inform their instructor as soon as possible but not later than one week prior to the midterm.

**Weekly Discussion Topics and Example Readings (subject to revision)**

<u>Week</u>	<u>General Topic</u>	<u>Specific Topics</u>	<u>Example Readings</u>
week 1 Jan 8 <sup>th</sup>	Introduction – discussion of the definition and evolution of Mortuary Archaeology	Mortuary Archaeology; Archaeoethnology	Binford (1971) Mortuary practices: Their study and potential; Knüsel (2014) Crouching in fear: Terms of engagement for funerary remains
week 2 Jan 15 <sup>th</sup>	Ethnographic studies of mortuary rituals;  Broad anthropological/  sociological analyses of mortuary rituals	Tripartite structure of rites of passage	Parker Pearson (1982) Mortuary practices, society and ideology: an ethnoarchaeological study; Van Gennep (1909) Rites of passage; Huntington & Metcalf (1991) Celebrations of death (Preliminaries)
week 3 Jan 22 <sup>nd</sup>	The mortuary ritual in the modern world	The North American funeral industry	(Jackson (2009) "Death Becomes Them"; A funeral home ethnography); Huntington & Metcalf (1991) Celebrations of death (American Deathways); Sanders (2012)
week 4 Jan 29 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Presentations of assignment #1</b>	Ethnographic studies of mortuary rituals	
week 5 Feb 5 <sup>th</sup>	Death and burial in the paleontological record	Contexts of discovery of fossil hominin remains; <i>Homo naledi</i> ; Neandertals	Berger (2023) - Evidence for deliberate burial of the dead by <i>Homo naledi</i> + accompanying peer reviews
week 6 Feb 12 <sup>th</sup>	Death and burial in the Neolithic	The first mortuary monuments – <i>Tombs for the Living</i>	Fleming (1973) Tombs for the living
Feb 19 <sup>th</sup>	Reading Week		

week 7 Feb 26 <sup>th</sup>	Cannibalism and mortuary ritual	The anthropology of anthropophagy	Forsberg (2019)
week 8 Mar 5 <sup>th</sup>	Death and burial in Ancient Egypt	The Book of the Dead;  Mummies and the industry of death	Meskell (2001) The Egyptian way of death
week 9 Mar 12 <sup>th</sup>	Death and burial in Classical Antiquity  Assignment #2 due today	The use of mortuary ritual to reinforce fledgling states	Pollock (1991) Of priestesses, princes and poor relations: the dead in the Royal Cemetery of Ur
week 10 Mar 19 <sup>th</sup>	Death and burial in Pre-Columbian Peru	The venerated ancestors	Eeckhout & Owens (2015)
week 11 Mar 26 <sup>th</sup>	Death and burial in Middle Age Europe	Mortuary rituals and mass death – The Black Plague(s)	Antoine (2008) The archaeology of the “plague”
Week 12 Apr 2 <sup>nd</sup>	Death and burial in popular culture	Deviant burials; Hollywood and the undead	Durkin (2003). Death, dying and the dead in popular culture.
Week 13 Apr 9 <sup>th</sup>	workshopping of final assignments		
April 17 <sup>th</sup>	Assignment #3 due today		

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